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Version: Published Version

Online resource:

Calvo, Dafne (2020) To rediscover their public value universities can learn from the free culture movement. Impact of Social Sciences Blog (14 May 2020). Blog Entry.

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To rediscover their public value universities can learn from the free culture movement

*The culture of acceleration and quantification that arguably defines contemporary academic research is closely related to the information society in which we live and the technologies that support it. In this post **Dafne Calvo**, argues that the democratic decentralised principles of the free culture movement provide a blueprint for how academics and academic institutions might create an alternative to the accelerated academy.*

Cultural production – the social processes involved in the generation and circulation of cultural forms, practices, values, and shared understandings – are shaped and influenced by an economic and political context that the sociologist Manuel Castells refers to as [informationalism](#). Constitutive of informationalism, new technologies provide unprecedented capabilities for extracting and processing data and thus deriving financial value from it, contributing in this way to the power of technological oligopolies that create and accumulate knowledge.

This can be seen in the academy in the multiple forms by which information technologies have become essential to its management, such as; the quantification of academic performance, competition between research centres and researchers over these metrics and the rising administrative workloads associated with generating them. Ultimately, this context contributes to the homogenisation of thought and the elite competitive character of the University through the [acceleration of work rhythms](#) and the reproduction of social inequalities. Here, I want to argue that free culture – a movement that promotes freedom in modification and distribution of cultural products – could help address these problems, as the values underpinning free culture support the collaborative creation and universal access to all forms of knowledge.



0.

The academy should use free software. Free code is articulated around the 'four freedoms' proposed by [Stallman](#): 0) to run the software; 1) to study and adapt it; 2) to distribute it, and 3) to improve and publish it. These freedoms are significant, as they subvert hierarchical production processes and liberate the use of programs from profit maximization. In academia, IBM represents an instructive example of proprietary software's implicit restrictions to the production and circulation of knowledge. Although the company is one of the main contributors to free software projects, its statistical package SPSS has a copyright license whose cheapest purchase plan costs more than 1,000 dollars per year. This imposition implies a high barrier for those who cannot assume that level of funding. It highlights how the ability to use software depends on social circumstances, with methodological implications if we depend on access to software to replicate prior studies. Alternatively, the R programming language and free software environment could easily replace IBM's commercial software, continuing to use SPSS is a choice. The influence of universities means that their adoption of open software, could reinforce the development of this type of code. Furthermore, the choice of free software programs not only contributes to the acquisition of new technical skills, but also the critical use of technologies outside of academia.

1.

Research results should be open access. If free software is defined by the freedom to access, contribute, modify, and distribute computer programs, [free culture extends these principles to all types of cultural production](#), including academic research. According to a [2013 study](#), the multinational publishing houses Elsevier, Wiley, Springer, Taylor & Francis, and Sage accumulated 47% of global scientific production. Generally, their journals impose fees, either in the form of subscriptions, or for the right to publish in open access journals. As an example, Sage's open-access option costs \$3,000. Accessing and contributing to scholarly research, is constrained by these paywalls, [as not all people and not even all scholars](#), have access to the funding required to access and publish in these journals. However, such journals remain the top ranked journals and for academics to progress their careers, they are obliged to publish in them. Free culture, points to how research can only have a meaningful impact, if it is distributed openly. Current research assessment practices, place the greatest value on the internal academic assessment of research through peer review and citation. They are less able to measure the social value of research beyond the academy. As such, the academic community must actively search for formulas to evaluate the quality of research without preventing its universal access.

2.

Knowledge should be co-produced. As stated above, free culture applies to academic practices in terms of consumption and dissemination, and it profoundly connects to scientific production, where free culture proposes decentralised contributions in non-hierarchical spheres. In research, this has its parallel in critical epistemology and specifically participatory action research. This method is a systematic and controlled process of analysis, oriented towards social intervention and involves both the subjects who investigate as well as the investigated people. Participatory action research is characterised by its aim of promoting the self-determination of participants and its orientation to social change, attempting to subvert the ["cosifying tendency"](#) of the scientific process. In the social sciences, this kind of democratic and transformative research has been championed by international research groups and projects, such as [CIMAS Network](#) in Spain and [Media & Research Action Project](#) in the United States.

3.

Research should be orientated towards social transformation. Culture and free software do not only address technical or legal issues, but they are also subversive insofar as they propose alternatives to the economic and political conditions of informationalism. Their communities often present strategies to liberate knowledge from extractive processes of production and consequently, their premises imply social change.

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Free culture contributes a political vision of academic activity, as it critically analyses the commodification of research practices. At present, knowledge runs the risk of being capitalised by investing in proprietary software for analysis; by imposing fees for downloading scientific articles; by making methodological and theoretical decisions depending on the most cited trends. The production, consumption, and distribution of scientific outputs inspired by free culture offers practical solutions and alternatives to these problems. The widest possible dissemination of knowledge fights against knowledge remaining a preserve of elites; the reflection on other methodological and theoretical approaches ensures the presence of diverse viewpoints, and new criteria for the evaluation of research could subvert quantitative metrics. Finally, as heightened competitiveness and decreasing time for reflection and creativity come to define the academy, then collective work becomes an exercise of resistance.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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